

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE
OFFICE OF PLANNING



Where do you find archaeology in a big city like Washington, D. C.?

Over 400 archaeological sites have been recorded in the District of Columbia. They have been found in every part of the city from along the rivers to the rocky slopes of the Rock Creek. Sites are even found under buildings and roads. These sites provide information on the people that lived here over the last 12,000 or more years [insert time line] all the way to the present. Archaeology provides information on the vanished landscape covered over by pavement, houses, and office buildings.

There are remnants of houses, fire pits or hearths, cooking pots, fishing gear, and stone tools that tell the story of how prehistoric people used the land and its resources. The Potomac River was a place Native American people visited yearly to catch and preserve vast amounts of fish during annual shad runs. Stone tools were made from cobbles (rounded rocks) from streams, and stone bowls were carved from steatite (soapstone) quarried from Rock Creek.

There are also many sites from the historic period that tell us about colonial life when the District was still part of the Maryland Colony. Most historic sites however are from later periods after the establishment of Washington as the nation's capital. Sites from farms, plantations, rooming houses, alleys, taverns, and townhouses have been found.

There are sites that help us understand something about the lives of enslaved African Americans, and later, of emancipated African Americans on farms, tenant farms, in the city, and in the suburbs.

Some sites reflect occupations or industries like milling, ship building, and pottery manufacturing. Other sites help us understand civic functions like jails, hospitals, cemeteries, and schools. Recreational activities are also reflected such as taverns, brothels, restaurants, and parks.

Military activities and campaigns are represented including the War of 1812, and the Civil War. A few sites represent unique, one-time events like the Burning of Washington by the British Army in August 1814, or the death of Presidents Lincoln at the Petersen House. A tour of historical archaeological sites in the District tells about some of these sites and what has been learned from them.

When is archaeology done in DC?

Archaeology is part of Historic Preservation because sites preserve evidence of the past, and it is the unique information potential on the past that make them significant. This information is only available through archaeology.

The DC Historic Preservation Office reviews certain kinds of construction and development projects to ensure that they do not harm important aspects of the District's history. This work is done by architectural historians, preservations specialists, and planners, but an archaeologist also reviews the projects that involve ground-disturbing construction (digging). Federal and District laws are the triggers that start the review processes that may result in adding archaeological investigations (a dig) to a construction project. The review process is called consultation.

Highway, pipeline, and Metro construction resulted in the discovery and excavation of many sites across the city. These projects have long, narrow paths that cut through many environments and neighborhoods. Sites from every time period have been found on these projects. Examples include the Whitehurst Freeway, Anacostia Metro Station, and Anacostia Force Main sewer line.

The construction of many public buildings was preceded by archaeological investigations. These include the old Civic Center (demolished 2004-2005), the current convention center, the arena at Gallery Place, the International Trade Center at Federal Triangle, the Museum of the American Indian, and the proposed Museum of African American History and Culture (not yet built).

The DC City Archaeologist reviews projects, maintains the records of the sites and their locations, and a library of reports of the digs. Many of the artifacts from the digs on District government property are managed by the City Archaeologist and are stored in several locations. Federal agencies may curate their own collections.

All the information on sites, projects, collections, and reports is managed using electronic databases and a Geographic Information System, or GIS. A GIS is a program that combines mapping with data tables, and is a powerful tool for keeping track of large amounts of information. The GIS is used to help identify locations where buried sites might be present and to make sure new projects don't harm known sites.

The federal and District laws that apply to historic preservation set out procedures for determining when archaeological investigations are needed through a consultation process. The District has standards and guidelines on how archaeological investigations should be conducted, and how the results should be described in technical reports. The City Archaeologist participates in the consultation process and reviews the work plans and reports on the results of the investigations.

Technical reports combine all the information learned from a dig into a document that allows others to understand what was found and the history, use, and purpose of the excavated site. The contexts of all the artifacts and features are described in words, maps, drawings, and photographs. These reports are very detailed because they replace the archaeological record destroyed by digging and construction with the written description of the site. Writing reports often takes much longer than the actual digging because there is so much information to pull together, and artifacts to process.

The reports, field records, artifacts, photos, and drawings from a project form a collection that needs to be organized and packaged so that it will last for years. Curation is the long-term storage of collections so that people in the future can use them. Special packaging that does not deteriorate or fall apart over time is used to help preserve collections for the long term.

When archaeologists say "Save the Past for the Future!" they mean don't destroy or dig sites unless there is real need to do so, carefully record sites so that the information contained in them is not lost, and curate the collections and information so that they are preserved for future use.

If you think you know of a site that may not be recorded please contact the City Archaeologist, Ruth Trocolli at 202-442-8836, or ruth.trocolli@dc.gov.